

FACT SHEET

FOOD FOR YOUR SPORT – ULTRA-DISTANCE RUNNING

ABOUT ULTRA-DISTANCE RUNNING

For many, the traditional marathon is no longer considered the ultimate endurance running event! Ultra running has emerged as a popular way for runners to challenge their body and mind.

Ultra running refers to distances beyond the 42.2km distance of a standard marathon. A range of ultra events are held around the globe, with distances of 50km, 100km, 50mile (80.5km) and 100mile (160.9km) common. Ultra running events take different formats, from repeated shorter laps or circuits on relatively flat tracks, to rugged cross-country trails. Often events are run from 'point to point'. Ultra events can also involve obstacles and rogaining. Events can be run within one day or over several days.

Many people choose to do ultra running events as a personal goal and challenge, while others are highly competitive, with international racing and World Championship races for a range of distances.

Ultra running requires many hours and significant effort to train for events of such a long distance. Many ultra events are held on challenging cross-country trails, which means some training sessions are ideally held in the hills. Significant travel to appropriate training areas may therefore be required. Considering the length of the events, the volume of training is also high and this can have a significant impact on nutrition requirements.

Conditions for ultra running can be very different to the local environment and not all events are conducted at sea level! Considerations such as altitude, heat and humidity are important and may also determine training practices and nutrition needs. Ultra running requires dedication, commitment, determination and good aerobic capacity. A good sense of direction is also handy!

TRAINING DIET

Individual requirements will be determined by training load, type of sessions and training goals, specific individual needs, environment, body composition goals, health and adjustment for growth in younger runners.

The best training diet will depend on the type of trail runner and target events. Some people might throw in a trail run as part of an overall mixed week of exercise, while others may be more serious competitors working towards specific races. Either way, there are some common principles when it comes to nutrition for training:

- **Fuel** – appropriate type, amount and timing of muscle fuel (predominantly carbohydrate but also fat at lower intensities) important for training.
- **Repair** – protein is important to repair muscles between runs and for healthy mitochondria (the powerhouse of exercising muscle cells).
- **Energy and health** – a range of nutrients including vitamins and minerals, antioxidants, fats and fibre help our bodies to work at their best. A range of fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds and healthy fats are an important part of a great base diet.

Many ultrarunners tend towards a higher carbohydrate intake due to high fuel needs. There has been recent publicity about using a low-carb, high-fat (LCHF) diet to fuel ultra running, with the goal of enhancing fat as a fuel rather than relying on continual topping up of carbohydrate during training and events. Ultra running is potentially one pursuit that could suit a LCHF approach for some, as events can be completed at a lower intensity than marathon distance, allowing fat to be recruited as fuel. At higher intensities our body relies on carbohydrate to fuel performance, so if you need bursts of speed carbohydrate is critical. If you are considering this, discuss with an Accredited Sports Dietitian.

FLUID NEEDS

It is important to start your run hydrated. This requires regular fluid intake throughout the day leading up to training or competition. Having a drink with all meals and snacks is a good start.

It's also important to replace fluid losses during and after training. Individual fluid losses will vary depending on individual sweat rate, which is partly genetic but also determined by environmental factors. Hot or humid weather can lead to high body fluid losses. Hydration needs depend on the event, environment and practicality.

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Rather than relying on perceived sweat rate or thirst to determine fluid needs, a useful way to estimate fluid losses is to measure weight before and after a run. It is a good idea to do this in different training environments over time. This allows a better understanding of individual sweat losses and helps to plan fluids for training or races.

EATING BEFORE COMPETITION

Each runner will differ in their preferred food and fluids in the lead up to a race. For some events, carbohydrate loading may be relevant. There are a number of ways that this can be achieved, and it is important to discuss these needs with an Accredited Sports Dietitian for best results.

Many ultra runners prefer to increase carbohydrate in the day or days prior to an event, then keep their race-day breakfast to something light and quickly digested. If running pace is likely to be lower for longer distances, a bigger breakfast may be tolerated. The pre-race/event meal should focus on carbohydrate. Small amounts of protein can help to prevent hunger. Avoidance of excess fat and fibre can help with gut comfort.

Individual preference and tolerance will influence pre-race food and fluid intake, however, some ideas for suitable pre-run breakfasts include:

- Light style cereal or oats/porridge with fruit
- Toast with vegemite + piece of fruit
- Toasted sandwich
- Pasta or rice dish
- Rice cakes with peanut butter + banana

If solids don't sit well before a race, or runners are very nervous, a liquid source of protein and carbohydrate such as a fruit smoothie can be a good option.

EATING AND DRINKING DURING COMPETITION

Fuel requirements and preferences will differ between individuals. Due to the duration of ultra running events, it's essential to consider fueling strategies - fuel needs will depend on level of ability and running pace. For longer, slower races there will be more opportunity to consume solid foods, however the faster the pace, the more likely quick and easy fuel sources will be preferred.

Hydration is important, as well as electrolyte replacement if you are running in hot and humid conditions or over a prolonged period of time.

It is important to check where the aid stations are along the course and what will be available at each. This will help you plan what nutrition can be obtained on course and what must be carried by the runner.

The key is to work out what works best for each individual. Although it is challenging to replicate race-day circumstances (as they change from race-to-race), using training runs is a good time to practise event day nutrition to determine what sits well and fuels the body well.

RECOVERY

Recovery meals and snacks should contain carbohydrate (fuel), some protein (for muscle repair and development) and plenty of fluids and electrolytes to replace sweat losses. A recovery meal or snack should be consumed soon after exercise, remembering that recovery nutrition extends well beyond the initial hours after the run. Fluids (mainly water) should also be consumed, based on estimated losses.

Some recovery food suggestions include:

- Wrap with chicken, cheese and salad
- Milkshake or flavoured milk
- Chicken stir-fry with rice or noodles
- Homemade pizzas with cheese & veggies

OTHER NUTRITION TIPS

- **Be organised** Runners should have snacks ready to go as it can be difficult to rely on the course/ event to provide appropriate choices.
- **Eat by the clock** Set a timer during races to remind you to eat and drink when your appetite is likely to be poor and you may not feel like food.
- **Practise!** Trial, trial, and trial again to work out the best foods and fluids for you. The difference a well-planned nutrition strategy can make could be the difference between finishing, setting a PB or not finishing and having a disastrous race! An Accredited Sports Dietitian can help you develop a plan for optimal event day performance.